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OR

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FINE ARTS.

On the past and present state of the Fine Arts in Ireland.

No. III.

THE complete restoration of the Fine Arts in Italy, towards the close of the 15th century—an event which had so great an influence in promoting the civilization of the western world, was for a long time but little felt in Ireland. The soil, in fact, was not yet fitted for the seeds that might accidentally be dropped in it, in this country. England, even as early as the reign of Henry the Seventh, derived some honour from giving employment to the eccentric and skilful painter Mabuse; and in the following reign deserved far greater glory for its extensive patronage of the Fine Arts. The last Henry endeavoured even to tempt the divine Raphael, and Titian the prince of colourists, from the parent country of Art, and actually succeeded for a while in fixing the celebrated Florentine sculptor, Peter Torregiano, among the English *beasts*, as Cellini tells us that renowned sculptor with the noble countenance used to call them—but above all, Henry had the merit of appreciating the rare talents of Holbein, and of rewarding them with a munificence worthy of a prince. Even the brief and bloody reign of Mary was rendered in some degree illustrious, by her patronage of Sir Antonio More, and the glorious one of her sister Elizabeth, gave employment to the genius of De Heere, Ketel, Frederick Zuccherro, with Hilliard and Oliver, the miniature painters, and a crowd of other artists of scarcely inferior merit. During all these periods, and indeed till the Augustan age of the first Charles, no name of any artist of note can be discovered in Ireland, and but faint traces of any regard for Art. Is this to be wondered at? or, on the contrary, should it not excite a pleasing surprise in the mind, to discover that any the smallest flowers of taste had blossomed, in a region desolated so long by continued storms of anarchy and civil war.

We have still in existence a very interesting example of the sculpture of this age—a statue of the Virgin and child, the size of life, carved in Irish oak: it is preserved in the new church of the Carmelites in Whitefriar-street. The style of this curious monument is dry and gothic—yet it has considerable merit, far too much indeed, to allow us to suppose it a work of Irish art. We rather attribute it to some able carver of Albert Durer's school, to whose time and style it unquestionably belongs, and we should not deem it very unlikely even to be an early work of that great master's own hand.

There are some circumstances relative to the preservation of this statue, preserved by tradition, which have not hitherto appeared in print, and which may probably interest the reader. It was originally the distinguished

ornament of St. Mary's Abbey, at the north side of Dublin, where it was not less an object of religious veneration, than of wonder and admiration for its beauty. Its glory, however, was but of short duration. The storm of the reformation came—the noble religious structure to which it appertained was given to the Earl of Ormonde for stables for his train, and the statue was condemned, and, as it was supposed, consigned to the flames. One half of it was actually burnt—but it was that moiety which to a Saint is perhaps not absolutely indispensable, and which, at least when placed in a niche, is not much missed: the other half was carried by some devout or friendly hand to a neighbouring Inn yard, where with the face buried in the ground, and the hollow trunk appearing uppermost, it was appropriated, for concealment and safety, to the ignoble purpose of a hog-trough! In this situation it remained till the tempest had subsided, and the 'noble rage' of the Iconoclasts had passed away, when it was restored to its original uses in the humble chapel of Mary's parish, which had grown up from the ruins of the great monastery to which the statue had originally belonged. But in the long night of its slumber in obscurity, a great change had taken place in the spirit of the times, more dangerous to its safety than even the abhorrence of its iconoclastic enemies:—no longer an object of fervent adoration to the pious devotee, or of admiration to any except the curious antiquary, it was considered of little value by its owners. Within the last few years—the ancient silver crown with which it was adorned, was taken from the Virgin's head, sold for its intrinsic value as old plate, and melted down;—and the statue itself would most probably have followed the fate of its coronet, had it not been rescued and secured for a trifling sum by the worthy prior of the convent in which it is at present deposited.

In the same church of the Carmelites, there are two other statues of equal age, which will give a juster notion of the taste of our ancestors in sculpture at that period. They are figures of the Virgin and child, and of St. Francis, both utterly barbarous.

If, however, our progress in taste was but languid in comparison with that of our neighbours, yet it was decidedly an advancement of which the footsteps are still discernible. A gradual improvement may be marked in our monumental sculpture from the commencement

* This crown is very generally supposed to have been the identical one used at the coronation of Lambert Simnel, in Dublin, but, as we incline to think, erroneously. Ware says that the crown used on the occasion was supposed to have been taken from the statue of the Virgin, in the church of the Abbey of St. Mary Les Dames, which stood where Dame-street now is. The crown itself we have often seen exposed for sale in the window of the jeweller to whom it was sold. It was a double arched crown, such as appears on the coins of Henry the Seventh, and on his only—A circumstance which marked, with exact precision, the age of the statue which it had adorned.

of the 16th century, to the reign of James the First, when with the restoration of the classic orders, that mongrel style of sepulchral monument came into vogue, in which the skill of the architect and the sculptor, the painter and the gilder, were equally required, and of which the well known monuments of archbishop Jones and the Earl of Cork, in Patrick's cathedral, are such magnificent examples.

Portrait painting appears to have been practised amongst us even as early as the reign of Henry the Eighth. The galleries of the Duke of Leinster, and some others of our most ancient nobles, furnish us with examples of that period; and miniature pictures of Elizabeth's time are not uncommon. Still it is altogether unlikely that we had any artists of eminence, and such as we had, were no doubt, foreigners. Any pictures to be found possessed of merit—and they are very rare—were probably painted in England or abroad: we have some portraits that might be the work of Holbein, and miniatures that were unquestionably from the delicate hand of Isaac Oliver.† Our sculptors too, mean as was their merit, were most probably also importations. The interesting little ancient city of Kilkenny, once famous for the number of its stately tombs, must have had some artists in this department settled among them; and we know that as early as the commencement of the 16th century, Pierce Earl of Ormonde, and his amiable wife, Margaret Fitzgerald, "collected out of Flanders and the neighbouring provinces, artificers, whom they employed and encouraged at Kilkenny, in working *tapestry*, diaper, Turkey carpets, &c." and if, as conjectured, the tapestry in the castle, in which the story of Decius is represented, be the work of those foreigners, it is not discreditable to their taste and ingenuity. When statuary works of superior skill were required, recourse was necessarily had to foreign aid.—The monument of Thomas, Earl of Ormonde and Ossory, destroyed in the time of the usurper, was the work of Nicholas Stone, the chief Statuary in England in his time, as appears from the following memorandum from his pocket-book, given by Horace Walpole:—"In June, 1614, I bargained with Sir Walter Butler, for to make a tomb for the Earl of Ormonde, and to set it up in Ireland, for the which, I had well paid me £100 in hand and £300 more when the work was set up in Kilkenny." Even so late as the year 1642, the monument to Bishop Roth, in the same cathedral, was, according to tradition, wholly the work of an Italian ecclesiastic.

It is, however, to our domestic architecture of the sixteenth century, that we can refer with greatest pleasure for proofs of the advances made in the finer arts of civilized life. In this

† Horace Walpole says—"In a sale of pictures brought from Ireland, was a large oval head of Lucy Harrington, Countess of Bedford, and the marriage at Canaan, by Isaac Oliver.

particular, we of the present day have little cause for triumph over the taste of our rude forefathers, as we are pleased to call them. The castellated mansions of our ancient nobles—and the houses of the wealthy burghers of those times, are not less remarkable for their superiority in point of comfort and convenience, to the gloomy towers, or the wood or mud houses of earlier times, than for the fine sense of the picturesque in outline and embellishment which they exhibit, as compared with the utterly tasteless and unsightly edifices of our own times.

What an assemblage of pleasing forms do those durable buildings exhibit; how beautiful their intricacy of outline—their pointed pyramidal gables—their ornamented doors and gateways, their oriel mullioned windows, with their drip labels projecting over them like graceful eyebrows;—their very chimneys were made to contribute, by the beauty of their form, to the general effect, and are as necessary to the picturesqueness of the edifice, as to its convenience. Nor should we forget an interesting though not an architectural feature in those edifices, the pious mottoes inscribed in some conspicuous part of the building, over the porch or entrance, usually in conjunction with the name or initials of the founder, with which those of his wife's maiden name are always united, as, "If God be with us, who shall be against us;" "Nisi Dominus edificaverit Domum in vanum laboraverunt que edificaverunt eam," and such like. Then if we examine their interior, how imposing is their massive grandeur, how picturesque their ample chimney pieces, what richness of colour and effect in their carved pannelled oak wainscots! It may be objected that they are not always in pure taste, we grant it, and confess also that the best specimens we have are poor, in comparison with those of the sister island; but if we except the modern imitations of the buildings of this period, which are for the greater part, fantastical gimcrackery abortions, what have we at present to compare with them? square brick boxes with holes in them for windows, disgusting to the eye, and tawdry paper decorations almost equally offensive within: verily we have but little doubt on our minds as to which we should apply the term civilized, and which the epithet barbarous!*

Examples of the domestic architecture of the 16th century are now rarely to be found in Ireland. They were never numerous, for the country was too poor, and property too insecure, to encourage the erection of expensive and durable edifices, and their number has been sadly reduced by the dilapidations of time, the civil wars, and modern bad taste. In the vicinity of our metropolis there is nothing of the kind to refer to, except the noble mansion of the Talbotts of Malahide, the exterior of which preserves, indeed, but little of its original character, but in which there still remains, in exquisite preservation, a carved oak chamber, a sight of which is ample compensation for a day's journey. It is not a little remarkable that it was in a western county of Ireland, now considered as one of the least civilized, that the finest and greatest number of such structures were erected. We allude to the county of Galway. The castle of Portumna, the resi-

dence of the noble family of Clanricarde, which was unfortunately burnt a few years since, was justly considered the finest mansion of the Elizabethan age in this Island; and the houses of the wealthy citizens of the town of Galway, constituted a splendid assemblage of such structures, as its present remains evince, "though," as the able historian of that ancient city, writes, "the superb houses, which, in the language of the Annals, were 'fit to lodge kings and princes,' and described as the best built and most splendidly furnished of any in the kingdom, were seized upon and occupied," (during the usurpation) "by the lowest of the populace, until they were completely ruined." Galway, at this period, ranked as the first city in Ireland, not less for its wealth and commercial intelligence, than for the honourable feelings and high spirit of its citizens. By the fruits of their honest industry they possessed themselves of a great portion of the surrounding counties, in which their posterity remain; and if the pride of ancestry, for which these are said to be now remarkable, be an honest pride in the peaceful virtues of their forefathers, we should rather applaud than condemn the feeling; for we should ourselves feel more proud of being the inheritors of a few acres acquired by the honest industry of our fathers, than of the richest earldom, gained at the expense of suffering humanity, by the lawless sword of the soldier adventurer, or by the unfeeling mandate of a reckless tyrant.

Galway is now comparatively an obscure town. It has but little wealth; but little commercial spirit; no taste, and, we believe, no literature. There is not a bookseller's shop either in it, or in the seven surrounding counties! But it is not the fault of the Galwegians that they are reduced to this state, but the result of bad laws and unhappy events, over which they had no controul. At that distant period, when their stores were filled with foreign merchandise, and their houses "fit to lodge kings and princes," they were not less remarkable for their taste in art, than for their love of learning. Start not, gentle reader, at this compliment to the mental intelligence of the merchants of a rude Irish seaport. We hazard no idle conjecture—and as it is, and has been, a paramount object with us, in the course of these papers, to show the indissoluble union which ever exists between a taste for the arts and the general cultivation of the mind, we shall prove the truth of our present assertion. Galway could, at the period we refer to, boast of a public school of humanity, as it was called, endowed and supported by the spirit and love for learning of its citizens, which was the most celebrated and numerously attended of any in the kingdom.—Its character, at the time of its suppression, will be sufficiently appreciated from the following extract from the regal visitation book of the commissioners appointed by James I. to enquire into the state of education and ecclesiastical benefices in Ireland: and we give it the rather, as it has never been printed, having escaped even the laborious researches of the learned and worthy historian of that ancient city:—

"A publique schoole kept at Tuame by one Lally, a Master of Art, and a very sufficient scholler."

"We found in Galway a publique schoole-master named Lynch, placed there by the citizens, who had great numbers of schollers, not onely out of that Province, but also out of the pale and other parts resorting to him. We

had daily prooffe during our continuance in that citty, how his schollers profited under him, by the verses and orations which they presented unto us, we sent for that schoolemaster before us, and seriously advised him to conforme himselfe to the religion established, and not prevailing with our advyses, wee enjoyed him to forbear teaching: and I the chancellor did take a recognizance of him and some others of his kinsmen in that citty, in the some of 400*li*. sterling, to his Majesty's use, that from thenceforth he should forbear to teach any more, without the special license of the Lo. Deputy, &c. And in regard, Galway is a farr more publique and convenient place for the keeping of a schoole than Tuame is, Wee have ordered that Mr. Lally shall, at Michaelmas next, begin to teach publickly in that citty." (M.S. Regal Visitation Book, 1615.)

The "schoolmaster named Lynch," in the preceding extract, was that celebrated person who afterwards became titular Bishop of Killala, and who is so well known to the world as the author of *Cambrensis Eversus*, and other learned works. In solid learning he was inferior only, and that perhaps in a small degree, to one of the inquisitors who displaced him, and that one was the great and excellent Archbishop Usher. In the nobler endowments of benevolence and virtue, he was second to none, for as a recent biographer states, he was traditionally (and we believe truly,) informed,— "that he was a man of the greatest benevolence, amiable manners, and virtuous dispositions, and that the whole course of his life was distinguished by a prominent and unaltered feature—the love of humanity and his country."

We shall leave our readers to make their own comments on the whole of this most singular transaction, lest in the expression of our own opinions we might possibly wax indignant and political, a temper of mind wholly at variance with the mild influence of the humanizing subject of which we treat.

REVIEWS OF BOOKS.

Essay on the History, Religion, Learning, Arts, and Government of Ireland, from the birth of Christ to the English invasion. By John D'Alton, Esq. M. R. I. A. Barrister at Law—for the sixteenth volume of the Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy.—[UNPUBLISHED.]

This is a work which we feel a just national pride in being the first to introduce to public attention; it is one which, whether considered with reference to its most interesting and important subject matter, the lucid, laborious and masterly manner in which that difficult subject is treated, or the typographical elegance and accuracy with which the volume has been produced, reflects infinite credit on our country, for we are happy to announce that it is purely Irish in all its details. We really thought we had known something of Irish Antiquities ourselves, but the perusal of Mr. D'Alton's essay, which condenses all the vast and varied, and widely-scattered information, which before had been accessible only by a tedious and difficult research through a countless number of ponderous tomes in divers and strange tongues, has convinced us of our presumption, and has

* We need scarcely say, that we always except such noble structures as Kilrudeary Hall, and Shelton Abbey, both works of the younger Morrison, an artist who may glory in the name of architect. As to the great majority of our modern castles, we may well call them queer—neither fish nor flesh! One knows not what to make of them.